

The Decline And Splendor Of Nationalism

by Tomislav Sunic

No political phenomenon can be so creative and so destructive as nationalism. Nationalism can be a metaphor for the supreme truth but also an allegory for the nostalgia of death. No exotic country, no gold, no woman can trigger such an outpouring of passion as the sacred homeland, and contrary to all Freudians more people have died defending their homelands than the honor of their women. If we assume that political power is the supreme aphrodisiac, then nationalism must be its ultimate thrill.

To talk about nationalism in Anglo-Saxon countries usually evokes the specter of tribalism, violence, heavy politics, and something that runs counter to the idea of progress. For an American liberal, nationalism is traditionally associated with irrational impulses, with something incalculable that has a nasty habit of messing up a mercantile mind-set. A merchant does not like borders and national emblems; his badge of honor is his goods, and his friends are those who make the best offer on the global market. It is no coincidence that during World War II the Merchant preferred the alliance with the Commissar, despite the fact that the Commissar's violence often eclipsed that of the Nationalist. Daniel Bell once wrote that American liberals find it difficult to grasp ethnic infatuation because the American way of thinking is "spatially and temporally suspended." Indeed, to an insular maritime mind, it must appear absolutely idiotic to observe two people quarreling over a small creek or a stretch of land when little economic yield lies in the balance. A politician in America, unlike his rooted European counterpart, is essentially a realtor, and his attitude towards politics amounts to a real estate transaction. It is hard to deny that a person on the move, reared on Jack Kerouac or Dos Passos, is frightened by the ethnic exclusiveness that is today rocking the part of Europe from the Balkans to the Baltics. The mystique of the territorial imperative, with its unpredictable ethnic cauldron, must be a paramount insult to the ideology of the melting pot. Contrary to widespread beliefs, nationalism is not an ideology, because it lacks programmatic dimension and defies categorization. At best, nationalism can be described as a type of earthbound behavior with residues of paganism. Whereas liberalism operates in the rational singular, nationalism always prefers the irrational plural. For the liberal, the individual is the epicenter of politics; for the nationalist, the individual is only a particle in historical community. To visualize different brands of nationalism one could observe a European family camping on the rocky beaches of the French Riviera and contrast it to an American family on the sandy beaches of Santa Barbara. The former meticulously stakes out its turf, keeps its children in fold; the latter nomadically fans out the moment it comes to the beach, with each family member in search of privacy. Incidentally, the word "privacy" does not even exist in continental European languages.

Following World War II, for a European to declare himself a nationalist was tantamount to espousing neofascism. On the ossuary of Auschwitz, few indeed were willing to rave publicly about the romantic ideas of 19th century poets and princes, whose idyllic escapades gave birth, a century later, to an unidyllic slaughterhouse. At Yalta, the idea of a Europe frolicking with the liturgy of blood and soil was considered too dangerous, and both superpowers held high this reminder in the form of their respective strategy of "double containment." After their excursion into the largest civil war in history, Europeans decided not to talk about nationalism or

self-determination any longer. Many European intellectuals, and particularly German pundits, preferred instead to recommit their suppressed nationalist energy to far-flung Palestinians, Sandinistas, Cubans, or Congolese instead of to their own ethnic soil. Third World nationalism became for the European mandarins both the esoteric catharsis and the exotic superego; and to theorize about the plight of Xhosa in South Africa, or Ibo in Nigeria, or to stage treks to Cashmere or Katmandu became an elegant way of wallowing in new political romanticism. This vicarious type of meta-nationalism continued to play a role of psychological repository for the dormant and domesticated Europeans who needed time to heal wounds and wait for yet another renaissance.

Has this renaissance already occurred? The liberal parenthesis that lasted for 45 years, and which received its major boost after the recent collapse of its communist alter ego, may indeed be coming to an end. From Iberia to Irkutsk, from Kazakhstan to Croatia, hundreds of different peoples are once again clamoring for their place under the sun. To assume that they are raising their ethnic voices for economic reasons alone is misleading, and liberals are committing a serious mistake when they try to explain away nationalism by virtue of structuralist-functional paradigms, or when they shrug it off as a vestige of a traditional ascriptive society. Contrary to popular assumptions, the collapse of communism in Europe and the Soviet Union is a direct spin-off of ethnic frustrations that have for decades laid dormant, but have refused to die away. The paradox apparent at the end of the 20th century is this: while everybody is talking about integration, multiculturalism, ecumenism, and cosmic fraternity, fractures, fissures, and cleavages are appearing everywhere. Paradoxes abound as little Luxembourg preaches sermons to a much larger Slovenia on the utility of staying in the Yugoslav fold; or when Bush, after failing to rescue the Balts, comes to the aid of artificial satrapy in the name of the "self-determination" of its handful of petrocrats; or when Soviet apparatchiks fake concern for the plight of Palestinians only to further crack down against their Bashkirs and Meshkets.

Nationalism is entering today the third phase of its history, and similar to a heady Hydra and howling Hecuba it is again displaying its unpredictable character. Must it be creative in violence only? Ethnic wars are already raging in Northern Ireland, in the land of Basques, in Corsica, let alone in Yugoslavia, where two opposing nationalisms are tearing Versailles Europe apart and showering the treaty successors with embarrassing and revisionist questions.

There are different nationalisms in different countries and they all have a different meaning. Nationalism can appear on the right; it does, however, appear on the left. It can be reactionary and progressive, but in all cases it cannot exist unless it has its dialectical Other. German nationalism of the 19th century could not have flourished had Germany not been confronted by the aggressive French Jacobinism; modern English nationalism could not have taken off had it not been haunted by assertive Prussia. Each nationalism must have its 'Feindbild,' its image of the evil, because nationalism is by definition the locus of political polarity in which the distinction between the foe and friend, between hostis and amicus, is brought to its deadly paroxysm. Consequently, it is no small wonder that intra-ethnic, let alone inter-ethnic, wars (like the one raging today between Croats and Serbs) are also the most savage ones, with each side vilifying, demonizing, and praying for the total destruction of the other.

In addition, side by side with its positive founding myths, each nationalism must resort to its negative mythology, which in times of pending national disasters sustains its people in the fight with the enemy. In order to energize younger generations Polish nationalists will resurrect their

dead from the Katyn, the Germans their buried from Silesia and Sudetenland; Croats will create their iconography on their postwar mass graveyards, Serbs their hagiography out of their war-camp victims. Body counts, aided by modern statistics and abetted by high-tech earth excavators, will be completed by mundane metaphors that usually tend to inflate one's own victimology and deflate that of the enemy. German nationalists call Poles "Polacks," and French chauvinists call Germans "boches." Who can deny that racial and ethnic slurs are among the most common and picturesque of weapons used by nationalists world wide?

Nationalism is not a generic concept, and liberal ideologues are often wrong when they reduce European nationalism to one conceptual category. What needs to be underlined is that there are exclusive and inclusive nationalisms, just as there are exclusive and inclusive racisms. Central Europeans, generally, make a very fine distinction between inclusive Jacobin state-determined ('staatsgebunden') unitary nationalism vis-a-vis the soil-culture-blood determined ('volksgebunden') nationalism of Central and Eastern Europe. Jacobin nationalism is by nature centralistic; it aims at global democracy, and it has found today its valiant, albeit unwitting, standard-bearer in George Bush's ecumenical one-worldism. Ironically, a drive towards unitary French nationalism existed before the Jacobins were even born, and it was the product of a peculiar geopolitical location that subsequently gave birth to the modern French state. Richelieu, or Louis XIV, were as much Jacobins in this sense as their secular successors Saint-Just, Gambetta, or De Gaulle. In France, today, whichever side one looks -- left, right, center -- the answer is always Jacobinism. In a similar vein, in England, the Tudors and Cromwell acted as unitary nationalists in their liquidations and genocides -- ad majorem Dei gloriam -- of the Cornish and Irish and a host of other ethnic groups. Churchill and other 20th-century English leaders successfully saved Great Britain in 1940 by appealing to unitary nationalism, although their words would have found little appeal today among Scots and Irish.

Contrary to widespread beliefs, the word "nationalism," ('Nazionalismus') was rarely used in National Socialist Germany. German nationalists in the 1920's and 30's popularized, instead, such derivatives as 'Volkstum,' 'Volksheit,' or 'Voelkisch,' words that are etymologically affiliated with the word 'Deutsch' and which were, during the Nazi rule, synonymously used with the word 'rassisch' ("racial"). The word 'Volk' came into German usage with J.G. Fichte in the early 19th century, when Germany belatedly began to consolidate its state consciousness. The word 'Volk' must not be lightly equated with the Latin or English 'populus' ("people"). As an irony of history, even the meaning of the word "people" in the English language is further blurred by its polymorphous significance. People can mean an organic whole, similar to 'Volk,' although it has increasingly come to be associated with an aggregate of atomized individuals. Ironically, the German idea of the Volk and the Slavic idea of 'narod' have much in common; and indeed, each group can perfectly well understand, often with deadly consequences, each other's national aspirations. It is no small wonder that in the German and Slavic political vocabulary the concept of federalism and democracy will acquire a radically different meaning than in linguistically homogeneous England, France, or America.

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French and English nationalisms lack a solid territorial dimension, and their founding myths lie elsewhere. Over the course of their history, due to their colonial holdings, these countries have acted both as European and non-European nations -- which explains, particularly in the light of

massive non-European immigration -- why their elites find it difficult to argue for their strong ethnic identity. Continental European nationalism, and specifically the German idea of 'Volksheit,' is by contrast the product of a set of geographic circumstances unparalleled in France or England. In France and England, the people were created out of the existence of the state. In Germany and Continental Europe, nationalism has manifested itself primarily as a cultural phenomenon of frequently stateless peoples. In Germany, Poland, Romania, etc., poets and writers created the national consciousness of their peoples; in France, princes created state consciousness. Popular figures in Central Europe -- like Herder or Father Jahn in Germany, Sandor Petofy in Hungary, Ljudevit Gaj in Croatia, Vuk Karadzic in Serbia, or Taras Shevchenko in the Ukraine -- played a crucial role in laying the foundation of the modern state for their respective peoples. Quite different was the story of nationalism in France where 'legists' created the unitary French state by suppressing regionalism in the French Hexagon. Similarly, in England, the role of nation-state builders fell to merchants and to maritime companies, which, aided by buccaneers, brought wealth for the English crown. Interestingly, during the Battle of Britain, Churchill even toyed with the idea of transferring Downing Street and the Westminster Palace to the heartland of America -- a gesture which in Central Europe would have amounted to national suicide.

Like America, France first became a state, and in turn set the stage for the molding of the French people of different tribes; by contrast, Germans have always been a stateless yet compact people. The history of France is essentially the history of genocide, in which French rulers from the Capetians to the Bourbons, all the way down to modern Jacobins, meticulously carried out destruction of Occitans, Vendéans, Bretons, Franche-Comte, etc. Suppression of regionalism and nativism has been one of the major hallmarks of French acculturation, with the latest attempt being to frenchify Arabs from the Maghrib countries. Today, France is paying the price for its egalitarian and universalist dreams. On the one hand, it is trying to impose universal values and laws on the masses of Third World immigrants; on the other, it must daily proclaim the principle of self-determination for its multiracial social layers. If one puts things in historical perspective, everything presages that France has become a prime candidate for sparking off racial warfare all over Europe.

Looking at Germany and its East European glacis, a sharp eye immediately discovers a fluid area of levitating borders, "seasonal states," yet strong culturally and historically minded peoples. Central and Eastern Europe have a long ethnic and historical memory, but their borders fall short of clean-cut ethnographic lines. Germany, for instance, offers a view of an open and poorly defined stage yet at the same time it is a closed community. By contrast, Jacobin France, functionalist-minded England, and America are geographically closed states, but open societies. Nationalism in these countries has always been inclusive and has invariably displayed globalist and imperialistic pretensions, notably by spreading its unitary message to disparate peoples worldwide.

Geographic location has also affected the ethnopsychology of European peoples. An average German is essentially a peasant; his psychologic cast and conduct are corporal and telluric. A German displays great courtesy but lacks politeness, and like most peasants he usually exhibits heavy-handed ("schwerfaellig"), and frequently an awkward approach to social relations. By contrast, a Frenchman, irrespective of his ideological stripe and social background, is always a petty bourgeois; he is full of manners and stylishness but also full of pretensions. Unlike a

German nationalist, a Frenchman displays a surfeit of manners but lacks courtesy. Even the most ignorant foreign tourist who goes to Germany and France will notice something foggy and unpredictable about Germans, while at the same time he will be gratified by the German sense of professional correctness and absolute honesty. By contrast, the body language and mannerisms of the French, as appealing as they may be, frequently leave one perplexed and disappointed.

In the course of their ethnogeneses, languages gave final veneer to their respective peoples. The German language is an organic language that branches off into eternity; it is also the richest European language. The French language, similar to a great extent to English, is an opaque language spun more by context than by flexion. As idiomatic languages, French and English are ideal for maritime and seaport activities. Over the course of history the French *sabir* and 'pidgin' English proved to be astounding homogenizing agents as well as handy acculturative vectors for the English and French drives toward universalism. Subsequently, English and French became universal languages, in contrast to German, which never spread out beyond the East European marshlands.

The German idea of the 'Reich' was for centuries perfectly adapted to the open plains of Europe, which housed diverse and closely knit communities. Neither the Habsburgs nor the Brandenburgs ever attempted to assimilate or annihilate the non-Germanic peoples within their jurisdiction as the French and English did within theirs. The Danube monarchy, despite its shortcomings, was a stable society, proven by its five hundred years of existence. During the First and Second Reich, principalities, towns, and villages within the bounds of the Austrian and Prussian lands had a large amount of self-government that frequently made them vulnerable to French, Swedish, and English imperial ambitions.

German 'Volksheit' is an aristocratic as well as a democratic notion, since traditionally the relations between domestic aristocracy and the German people have been organic. Unlike France or England, Germany never experimented with foreign slavery. In Germany, ethnic differences between the local aristocracy and the German people are minimal; by contrast, in France, Spain, and England the aristocracy has usually recruited from the Northern European leadership class and not the masses at large. Incidentally, even now, despite the exactions of the French Revolution, one can see more racial differences between a French aristocrat and an average Frenchman than between a German aristocrat and a German peasant. In Germany the relationship between the elites and the commoners has always been rooted in the holistic environment, and as a result Germany has remained a society barely in need of an elaborate social contract; it has based social relationships on horizontal hierarchy and corporate structure, buttressed in addition by the idea of "equality among the equals." By contrast, French and English society can be defined as vertically hierarchical and highly stratified; consequently, it should not be surprising that French and English racisms were among the most virulent in the world. It is also worth recalling that the first eugenic and racial laws in this century were not passed in Germany, but in liberal America and England.

Political scientists will one day ponder why the most glaring egalitarian impulses appear in France and America, two countries which, until recently, practiced the most glaring forms of racism. Are we witnessing today a peculiar form of remorse or national-masochism, or simply an egalitarian form of inclusive racism? Inclusive nationalism and racism, that manifest themselves in universalism and globalism, attempt to delete the difference between the foreigner and the native, although in reality the foreigner is always forced to accept the legal superstructure of his

now "repented" white masters. By ostensibly putting aside its racist past, yet by pushing its universalist message to the extreme, the West paradoxically shows that it is no less racist today than it was yesterday. An elitist like Vilfredo Pareto wrote that liberal systems in decline seem to worry more about the pedigree of their dogs than the pedigree of their offspring. And a leftist, Serge Latouche, has recently written how liberal racists, while brandishing their ethnic national masochism, force liberal values and liberal legal provisions upon their "decorative coloreds."

Peoples and ethnic groups are like boughs and petals; they grow and decay, but seldom resurrect. France and England may evoke their glorious past, but this past will invariably have to be adjusted to their new ethnically fractured reality. Lithuania was, several centuries ago, a gigantic continental empire; today it is a speck on the map. The obscure Moscow in the 15th century became the center of the future Russian steamroller because other principalities, such as Suzdal or Novgorod, fantasized more about aesthetics than power politics. Great calamities, such as wars and famines, may be harbingers of a nation's collapse, but license and demographic suicide can also determine the outcome of human drama. Post-ideological Europe will soon discover that it cannot forever depend on the whims of technocratic elites who are in search of the chimera of the "common European market." As always, the meaning of carnal soil and precious blood will spring forth from those who best know how to impose their destiny on those who have already decided to relinquish theirs. Or to paraphrase Carl Schmitt, when a people abandons politics, this does not mean the end of politics; it simply means the end of a weaker people.

The author is a writer and former political science professor in the USA and is also a former Croatian diplomat. He is the author of Homo Americanus: Child of the Postmodern Age (Charleston: BookSurge Publishing, 2007)) and Against Democracy and Equality: The European New Right (Newport Beach, Cal.: The Noontide Press, 2004).